

1950s

On Friday, May 6 at 8.00 p.m., Mrs. Robert Flaherty will give a lecture on THE FILM ART OF ROBERT FLAHERTY and will show his film, "Moana of the South Seas."

Frances Hubbard Flaherty collaborated with her late husband, Robert Flaherty, in the making of all his major films. Following his death in 1951, Mrs. Flaherty, together with friends in the United States and Great Britain, established the Robert Flaherty Foundation in the belief that the films he made can be used to stimulate interest in and gain support for greater freedom for the independent artist in the use and development of the motion picture medium.

The following outline of Robert Flaherty's career is taken from a biography by Paul Rotha to be published in the Dictionary of National Biography (England, 1955.)

FLAHERTY, ROBERT JOSEPH (1884-1951), a film producer, explorer and author was born at Iron Mountain, Michigan, February 16, 1884, the eldest of seven children of Robert Henry and Susan (Kloeckner) Flaherty. Though he did not take kindly to formal education, he attended Upper Canada College, Toronto, and the Michigan College of Mines. On leaving college, the still unexplored regions of Canada's North attracted him and between 1910 and 1916 he led four expeditions into the Hudson Bay area under the sponsorship of Sir William Mackenzie. They mapped the large archipelago known as the Belcher Islands (to the largest of which the Canadian Government gave his name), the Baffin Land region and northern Ungava. On his third expedition, at Sir William's suggestion, Flaherty took along a motion picture camera, but the film he made of Eskimo life was accidentally destroyed by fire in Toronto. Later, having obtained financial backing from the French fur company, Revillon Freres, Flaherty returned to the North and made his first completed film, "Nanook of the North" (1922). From his experience with the Eskimos he wrote his first book, "My Eskimo Friends" (1924).

In "Nanook of the North" Flaherty established the foundations and first principles of the art of the documentary film. He used the film camera not merely to describe people and places but to reveal creatively their struggle for existence and their environment. "Nanook of the North" became one of the first classics of the screen; more than thirty years later, it is still widely studied and shown.

In 1923 Jesse L. Lasky, of the famous Players-Lasky Corporation (Paramount Pictures), commissioned Flaherty to make a picture of real life in the South Seas. With his wife, Frances, his three young daughters and his brother David, Flaherty spent the better part of two years on the Samoan island of Savai'i, making the film which was released under the title "Moana" (1926). Said to be the first full-length film photographed on the new panchromatic negative, "Moana" suggested again that the cinema had found its first poet. It created a deep impression in Europe, but the commercial trade in the United States handled it with reserve. It was when writing of "Moana" that John Grierson first used the word "documentary" to describe Flaherty's approach to film-making. (New York Sun, February, 1926.)